



Linked Learning demonstrates blend
of academics and career-focused learning

By: Lew Armistead

Blending academic and career-focused instruction could be the key to reforming public high schools. That's the intent of Linked Learning, an initiative in California that was featured at an August briefing, "Building the Capacity of Teachers to Prepare Students for College and Careers," held by the Alliance for Excellent Education. While Linked Learning is currently only operating in California, its concepts and core components could be transferable to public high schools elsewhere.

Creating meaning to instruction in the minds of students is essential to reform and achievement; yet, many young people question whether that is being done in schools. Seventy-one percent of secondary teachers and 83 percent of principals indicated that connecting classroom instruction to the real world has a major impact on improving student achievement, according to the 2009 MetLife Survey of the American Teacher. However, "...only a quarter of students strongly agree that teachers give examples of how things they learn in school can be used in the real world."

The California Linked Learning Approach strives to make that connection. Once called "multiple pathways," Linked Learning is based on four principles and another four core components. And while early research on the program's success is not conclusive, "it does look promising," according to Eric Richmond, a former researcher at the Alliance. He offered his comments in an Issue Brief, *Preparing Students for College and Careers: Linked Learning in California*, available through the Alliance.

"Engaging technical classes and opportunities to experience the workplace provide the relevance to real life that most students do not get in traditional high school settings," Richmond wrote. "A college-prep core ensures that each program is characterized by academic rigor. And the versatility of the knowledge and skills learned in a Linked Learning program means that students have varied opportunities after high school instead of a narrow subset of options based on the educational track on which they were placed."

As reported by Richmond, the guiding principles behind Linked Learning are—

- **Linked Learning prepares students for both college and career.** Understanding that both objectives are critical to future success, pathways are predicated on meeting both without forcing a choice. Students exiting a Linked Learning program should have no option closed off to them.
- **Linked Learning connects academics to the real world.** By integrating strong academics with a demanding CTE (career and technical education) curriculum, Linked Learning alters how core academic subjects are taught, without lowering expectations or watering down content.
- **Linked Learning leads to the full range of postsecondary opportunities.** Although not all Linked Learning students will enroll in a four-year college after high school, they will graduate prepared for the full range of options, including two- and four-year college, job training, apprenticeships, and certificate programs.
- **Linked Learning improves student achievement.** The Linked Learning approach is designed to improve graduation rates, increase postsecondary enrollments, (create) higher earning potential and (bring about) greater civic engagement. (The Raymond brief outlines some of the research already completed on Linked Learning.)

Raymond cited four core components of the California program—

- **A challenging academic component** delivers academics built around the A-G curriculum (a series of 15 courses required for admission to California's four-year public higher education systems) that are designed to prepare students for success without remediation in all postsecondary options.
- **A demanding technical component** delivers concrete knowledge and skills through a cluster of four or more technical courses. The focus is on preparing youth for high-skill, high-wage employment by emphasizing industry-related knowledge and skills, as well as academic principles and authentic applications that bring learning to life.
- **A work-based learning component** offers opportunities to learn through real-world experiences such as internships, apprenticeships, and job shadowing. Work-based learning helps students relate what they are learning in the classroom to the real world.
- **Supplemental services** provide counseling and academic support to help students through a challenging program of study.

One of the Linked Learning success stories in California is the transformation of San Diego's

Kearny High School, which was once one of the lowest-performing high schools in the city. After a period of restructuring, it was reopened as four small, theme schools, one of which was featured at the August briefing, Kearney School of Digital Media and Design. Others are Stanley E. Foster Construction Tech Academy (CTA), the School of International Business, and the School of Science Connections and Technology.

The CTA developed a series of multidisciplinary, hands-on, project-based classes called advisories, according to Richmond's brief. Advisories were developed and taught collaboratively by grade-level teachers across all disciplines. They infuse academic content and work skills into a student-run project with real-world applications, such as one ninth-grade activity where students bid on the construction of a theme park.

"School leaders found that not only did the project make students apply both academic and technical concepts taught in other courses, but it also forced them to collaborate in real-world situations," reported Richmond.

More information on the theme schools can be obtained on the school district's website school listing at <http://www.sandi.net/20451072095947640/site/default.asp>.

The James Irvine Foundation is funding a number of the Linked Learning projects, and has awarded initial implementation grants to six California districts —Antioch Unified, Long Beach Unified, Pasadena Unified, Porterville Unified, Sacramento City Unified, and West Contra Costa Unified. More information on the work of the Irvine Foundation in Linked Learning can be found at http://www.irvine.org/evaluation/113-program_evaluations/1050-california-multiple-pathways-district-initiative?format=pdf

Important role for school leaders

Implementing the Linked Learning approach requires strong administrative support, especially at the building level.

"Many of the key components for Linked Learning are not possible without administrator support in scheduling time, facilitating professional development, and lending general support to teachers to forge partnerships and develop new curriculum," wrote Lori Meyer, former director of research for the Alliance, in a Policy Brief, The Link Learning Approach: Building the Capacity of Teachers to Prepare Students for College and Careers, presented at the August briefing.

"...at the building level, working student internships into a school's schedule and ensuring that internships support academic and technical learning goals can be extremely challenging, often requiring some inventive planning. Add in the teacher time needed for peer observation and collaborative planning, and even the most seasoned teachers will be challenged without strong administrative support."

Meyer's brief recommends creation of small teacher teams or communities of practice as a strategy that can bring success in Linked Learning.

"Small teams not only facilitate shared planning activities, but they also promote a sense of community and ownership."

Professional development is essential when starting a Linked Learning approach, as attention must be paid to transforming the way teachers are prepared to lead their classrooms, according to Meyer.

"There are specific, unique professional development needs for Linked Learning teachers," she wrote. "Some of the most crucial areas of need for development and preparation include curriculum development, curriculum integration, and building and leveraging partnerships effectively."

The August event and the two publications cited here can be viewed at <http://www.all4ed.org/events/WebinarLinkedLearning081310>

September 2010

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